

## **Child or Commodity?**

*An analysis of the ethics of child influencers*

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## *Introduction*

Playing with dolls, making friendship bracelets, and learning to ride a bike are key moments in childhood. However, with the rise of the internet and social media, dolls have been replaced with iPhones, and friendship bracelets have been traded for online followers. With their lives constantly online, whether knowingly or unknowingly, it has allowed child influencers to take over social media platforms. From family influencers who share their children online to the youth who have taken *control* of their own platforms, child influencers are constantly sharing personal information with vast audiences of loyal followers. Since the influencing world is still relatively new, the ethics of this industry are a gray area, even for adults. Deep diving into the world of child influencers, this paper will analyze child labour and financial compensation, online privacy and the parental power imbalance of child influencers to prove that further safeguards and ethical guidelines are needed to ensure the safety and security of children online.

## *Play or Child Labour?*

Most social media platforms have an age limit requirement for all users creating an account or accessing their services. However, without strict verification, this safeguard is easy for children to bypass, as they can enter a false birthday or, more importantly, have their parents set up an account for them. While in most cases, parents allow their children to have these social media accounts as they are “just having fun,” if their child becomes popular and generates a new revenue stream, the once-fun platform becomes much more (Rotimi, Yap, & Wooliscroft, 2024). Often, the more popular an influencer, or, in this case, a child influencer, becomes, the higher the demand for content. Influencers generating large audiences lead to brand partnerships, endorsement deals, and increasing revenue streams (Ozcelik & Levi, 2021). At this point, the child’s image then becomes for sale as audiences demand content in return for engagement and

eventual profits (Rotimi, Yap & Wooliscroft, 2024). For example, Ryan Kaji, better known as Ryan's World, has an estimated net worth of \$100 million at 13 through his YouTube toy reviews and current partnership with PocketWatch, who use his image for numerous branded products (Khachatryan, 2024). With the child being the face of the platforms, it poses questions of when this supposed play overlaps with child labour.

Considering parents are at the helm of control of these child influencer accounts, there are concerns that the consistent need for content creates a paradox between the supposed play seen in videos and child labour. In the digital age, the trend of "playbour" has emerged, whereby child labour is hidden within the undertones of play. Take child toy unboxers, such as Ryan's World, for example; these children generate profits from unboxing and *playing* with toys (Rotimi, Yap & Wooliscroft, 2024). However, looking at the broad scheme of things, these actions are done in a professional context and conceal the compensation gained from the videos created (Cardoso, 2025). It all highlights how child influencers face the exploitation of digital labour, as parents deprive these children of childhood, education, and proper development, all based on creating content and generating revenue. While parents may hide behind the excuse of play, it does not hide the fact that audiences are unconsciously deceived by the world of child influencers and the brands they promote (Rotimi, Yap & Wooliscroft, 2024).

Considering the concepts of authenticity and honesty, the child influencer x brand partnership is entangled with supposed genuine reactions and commercial interest. Most sponsored content highlights the child utilizing the product and services, often expressing excitement about what they are playing with. While this seems reasonable for the brand, it warps audience trust as these reactions are underlined by the need to meet campaign deadlines and satisfy advertisers' expectations (Rotimi, Yap & Wooliscroft, 2024). Additionally, unlike adult

influencers, children lack the understanding and knowledge to provide trustworthy recommendations on specific products (Gorea & Jacobson, 2022). Considering how brands choose influencers, child influencers lack the source credibility, power, expertise and perceived trustworthiness required to be the “right influencer” (Ozcelik & Levi, 2021). Therefore, legally, the child has no expertise to promote a product, indicating the falsehood of authenticity and trust presented to audiences through the branded child influencer content (Cardoso, 2025). However, this lack of authenticity is not the child’s fault, as their parent controls the narrative behind the scenes.

Connecting back to the concept of “playbour,” this point is crucial since the parents receive the income from their child’s work. The child influencer, therefore, puts the work into the content and maintains the audience but receives no financial gain (Rotimi, Yap & Wooliscroft, 2024). Due to their age, all revenue generated from their content goes straight to their parents. So, while the parents commercialize their child’s image with or without their consent, the child has no safeguards for future financial stability or access to earnings. The influencer industry also has no limit on the quantity of content creation someone can do for a brand, so without contractual commitments, the child can be subjected to as much work as their parent requires (Martinez, 2024). The child, therefore, finds themselves in a common influencer trend, an unfair partnership with inadequate pay (Cardoso, 2025). So, with no universal laws or regulations in place, even within the FTC guidelines, parents do not have to set aside earnings for the child’s future use, which blatantly expresses how child labour is more prevalent in content creation than previously perceived.

*Two-for-One Sale on Privacy*

As noted, parents steer the narrative for their children on the internet. From curating their social media pages to producing, posting, and supervising content, the parent maintains the child's online autonomy. The once-nurturing relationship between child and parent shifts to a power contest, where the parent wields all authority over their child. Privacy and consent are overshadowed by the gained popularity and financial success, and intimate family moments are traded for what is perceived as "online authenticity." The child's privacy and personal information become a commodity, leaving them vulnerable to the harms of a connected online world (Rotimi, Yap, & Wooliscroft, 2024). From hate comments to the objectification of bodies to child predators, these children, under the discretion of their parents, find themselves victims of the desire for success in the influencer marketing industry (Valentino-Devries & Keller, 2024).

Furthermore, alongside lost privacy, the child also loses the boundary between work and home as the influencer model finds itself in an "always-on" environment with constant pressure to perform (Latifi, 2024). Growing up in this manner directly impacts their development and growth, ultimately stripping children of their autonomy and creative freedom as they are subjected to parental control and audience expectations (Rotimi, Yap & Wooliscroft, 2024). As noted by Lancaster University, children do not have the capacity, especially those under the age of 13, to informatively consent to sharing their lives with millions of strangers (Dell, 2024). That said, children cannot decide to become influencers, and at the end of the day, it is their parents' choice to create platforms, exploit their image, strip them of their privacy, and threaten their future, all for profit. Despite this harsh reality, few safeguards protect the best interests of digitally connected youth.

*Changing the Influencer Landscape*

With a rise in child influencers, platforms and lawmakers need to establish firmer laws and regulations for children online, especially since their only safeguard, their parents, have a conflict of interest since the child's success directly impacts them. First, regarding proper financial compensation, lawmakers should require parents to set aside earnings for the child's future use. Since the influencers are minors, parents currently hold ownership over all assets, and they are not required to set anything aside, which puts the child at risk of receiving no earnings for their labour. Therefore, increasing financial safeguards is essential to ensure these children have proper finances when they reach adulthood (Martinez, 2024). Lawmakers in certain states in the U.S., such as Illinois, Minnesota, and most recently California, have recognized this gray area in protecting child influencers and have introduced legislation whereby parents must place 15 percent of the child's earnings into a trust fund (Ball, 2024; Quinn-Kong, 2024). While this is a great start, some family influencers, such as Brittany Xavier, have moved out of these states to avoid such legislation, highlighting the need for globally universal laws to protect all child influencers financially (Delaney, 2024).

*Workplace* environments are another area of concern that needs to be regulated to ensure child safety and security online. While privacy and consent are significant concerns, there are also no laws that set parameters around the child influencer's relationship with brand partnerships. Essentially, the FTC guidelines do not limit how much an influencer can do for brands in a year, and if disclosures are present, they can create as much content as they wish for a specific brand or company (Martinez, 2024; Federal Trade Commission, 2019). This is increasingly concerning for child influencers as they can fall victim to companies that overexert their efforts to sell a product. However, some laws in certain countries regarding online child protection have proven effective. For example, in 2021, France introduced a law requiring child

influencers under 16 to have work authorizations, financial expectations, and legal representation, especially when working with brands. Through this law, it protected the child's generated income while addressing child labour and exploitation concerns. France's initiative indicates how implementing universal laws for child influencers is possible and must occur to protect the child and their futures (Abrams, 2023). While lawmakers play a significant role in this regulation, the onus also falls on platforms and brands to take responsibility for safeguarding children online.

A recent New York Times article found that in the 5,000 accounts examined of female child influencers, there were 32 million male connections negatively interacting with the accounts, implicating the easy access social media provides to child predators. In defence of the findings, a Meta spokesperson explained that it is up to the parent to control these accounts (Valentino-Devries & Keller, 2024). While this is true, further regulation of content by platform owners is also needed to help combat the abuses and privacy issues faced by child influencers.

Additionally, brands need to join the conversation as they are a driving force behind promoting child influencers. Considering parents' role in child influencing, brands should focus more on partnering with the parents than the children of a given platform. For example, Maia Knight, a TikTok influencer who gained popularity for sharing her day-to-day life as a single mom with twin girls, shifted her content to no longer feature her girls, protecting their privacy and focusing more on herself. Despite this, she has consistently maintained her influencer status while garnering brand partnerships, highlighting how content creators do not need to exploit their children for profit (Knight, 2023). While it is impossible to eradicate child influencing practices, brands must conduct intensive research and establish clear contractual agreements with the child to ensure compensation and proper working conditions. Through the work of lawmakers,

platforms and brands, child influence can transform from exploited digital child labour into a professional career.

### *Conclusion*

Since the rise of social media platforms, the lines between child labour, privacy and consent have blurred for the emerging child influencers as parental power imbalances, brand partnerships, and profit overshadow the apparent concerns. Through the analysis of child influencers and their involvement in the influencer marketing industry, it is evident that the practice needs stronger regulations and safeguards to protect children from the dangers of the online world. It is unclear where child influencing will find itself in the years to come, but the memory of these children will remain forever.

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